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# CASABLANCA

Curtiz, USA, 1942

## Awards

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Academy Awards: Winner – Best Film; Nomination – Best Actor (Humphrey Bogart), Best Supporting Actor (Claude Rains), Best Director and Best Screenplay

## Production Details

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Production company/studio	Warner Brothers
Producer	Hal B. Wallis
Director	Michael Curtiz
Cinematographer	Arthur Edson
Editor	Owen Marks
Screenwriters	Julius J. Epstein, Philip G. Epstein and Howard Koch (from a novel by Murray Burnett and Joan Allison)
Art director	Carl Weyl
Music	Max Steiner

## Cast Includes

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Humphrey Bogart	<i>Richard Blain</i>
Ingrid Bergman	<i>Ilsa Lund</i>
Paul Henreid	<i>Victor Laszlo</i>
Claude Rains	<i>Louis Renault</i>
Conrad Veidt	<i>Heinrich Strasser</i>
Sydney Greenstreet	<i>Ferrari</i>
Peter Lorre	<i>Ugarte</i>
Dooley Wilson	<i>Sam</i>

## FOCUS: Themes and Issues

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*Casablanca* is a magical entertainment; it forms bonds between strangers. When you buy or borrow a video copy of the film, the

Key Film Texts,  
2002, pp. 57-60  
Car. Robert 3 H. Wallis



assistant will hand over the box with a conspiratorial smile. 'Good choice,' he or she will whisper, as though you shared a similar taste in chocolates. This movie inspires that kind of thing: it is a holiday of the heart, a guy-loses-girl love story told with froth and zing; its pleasures appear to defy analysis. If you still await your first viewing, then lucky, lucky you.

All the same, there are some conundrums sloshing around in the champagne. First, for a love story, the film spends comparatively little time examining the Bogart–Bergman relationship as an active question in the present; it is much more interested in defining their love in terms of what once happened (the idyll of Paris) and how current feelings will influence the future (who gets the letters of transit and skedaddles out of the city). Secondly, an inordinate amount of time seems to be spent on subsidiary characters, like Claude Rains and the flotsam and jetsam floating on the surface of Rick's Café. This is odd, to say the least: it is as if *Gone with the Wind* (Fleming, USA, 1939) was constantly losing sight of the central Rhett and Scarlett relationship and getting distracted by minor details, like Aunt Pittypat's quince bottling or something. In short, *Casablanca* seems to be employing different methods for different purposes. The question is what those purposes are.

There is no denying this movie is a romance, but that does not mean it revolves exclusively around the Bogie–Bergman double act, like it would in a Howard Hawks story, for example. To refocus your sensibilities, push the two stars to the back of your mind and try to see *Casablanca* as an early 1940s version of *Star Wars* (Lucas, USA, 1977) (see chapter 28). Here, the nasty Nazi Conrad Veidt is Darth Vader, who represents the Evil (in this case, Fascism) threatening to take over the world; opposing him is the funky Jedi Knight Victor Laszlo (Paul Henreid) and bang slap in the middle is Rick (Bogart), our tuxedo-clad, and rather mature, combination of the idealistic Luke Skywalker and the cynical Han Solo.

Now *Star Wars* is clearly not interested in any one relationship between any one pair of characters; all the people in the story, all the concerns, are tributaries feeding into the great theme, which is the fairy-tale moral quest, where the hero undergoes a series of trials that reveal his latent powers and make him worthy of the final showdown with Evil. In the case of Luke Skywalker, he has to discover his true nature, his Jedi Knightness; Bogie, by contrast, has already been a Jedi Knight, back in Paris in his glory days as an anti-Fascist. The narrative aim of *Casablanca* is to help him rediscover the fact, to break out of his shell of Solo-style cynicism



and selfishness. Read in this fashion, the film is not centred on Ingrid at all – that is, on *who* the hero gets or whom he does not get. The meaning is rooted in *what* he gets, his reconversion to struggle, commitment and faith.

In this context, Bergman is Obi-Wan Kenobi, Humph's spiritual mentor, but one without a beard and with a vastly superior dress sense. As you watch the two leading players strut their stuff, consider how their love consistently connects with other varieties of love: love of justice, kindness, right doing and right being. Just as Obi-Wan educates Luke in the ways of the Force, which really works only when you trust to your innermost feelings, so Ingrid takes Bogart through a series of moral exercises, which are rooted in a concept of spiritual integrity and revolve round the question: Are you on the 'Dark Side' or are you with us? The whole rigma-role over the letters of transit should be viewed in this context. Try to see the love scenes as moral tests, not as the usual lips-to-lips business, and view the finale at the airport as Rick finally regaining a fully working light sabre, not losing the girl.

*Casablanca* is a product of the Second World War; it breathes the air of a global peril when sides had to be taken. In consequence, its story speaks, not just of love between individuals, but of the wider love of humanity, of a pressing psychological need to stand shoulder to shoulder with others against the black clouds that loom over the world. Tragically, this problem did not come to a halt in 1945; the question of evil remains constant throughout the generations, although its forms change. This perhaps is the secret of *Casablanca's* enchantment; it appeals to our hunger for a righteous cause, for a vision of something wider and more heroic than ourselves. It binds together you, me and (hopefully) every individual in the audience, because it dramatises a fundamental truth – that the self-absorbed business of kisses and sighs is never enough, that the human journey needs to be sustained by something grittier, more transcendent and in the end more beautiful: a case of do or die, a romance of valour.

### Some Things to Watch out for and Consider

- Think about the magical quality of place in this film. Ask yourself:
  - What does America represent?
  - What does Casablanca itself represent?
  - What does Paris represent for Ilsa and Rick?



- Think about some of the other characters. Ask yourself:
  - What is the significance of Claude Rains and Bogart walking off into the mist at the beginning of their 'beautiful friendship'?
  - How do the reactions of Rick's café staff help us to track the moral journey of the hero?
  - What is the importance of the Bulgarian couple in setting Rick back on the right course?
- Try retelling this as a twenty-first-century story, where Conrad Veidt is the representative of a sinister multinational corporation that is seriously threatening the environment.

## Further Viewing

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*Gone with the Wind* (Fleming, USA, 1939)  
*Passage to Marseilles* (Curtiz, USA, 1944)  
*To Have and Have Not* (Hawks, USA, 1944)  
*Play it Again, Sam* (Ross, USA, 1972)  
*Star Wars* (Lucas, USA, 1977)

## Further Reading

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A. Harmetz, *Round up the Usual Suspects: The Making of Casablanca* (London, 1993)  
C. Hirschhorn, *The Warner Bros Story* (New York, 1979)  
J. C. Myers, *Bogart: A Life in Hollywood* (Boston, 1997)